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ABSTRACT

Within the realm of forensic oral interpretation, concern over the use of profanity in presentations has aroused repressive criticism from some judges, who then express their offense by ranking the performance negatively. This judicial opposition is deleterious not only to the precepts of oral interpretation, but also--in a larger sense--to the pursuit of intellectual freedom. Contemporary literature abounds with profanity, but this usage reflects an accurate depiction of realistic language. Ironically, the same works objected to by forensic critics are heralded by theatre critics. Aside from avoiding the literature, a competing interpreter can employ an alternative, albeit counterproductive strategy: editing the offensive language from the script. Such excessive "dramatic license" disregards the author's intent, and reduces the dramatic effect. In proposing a satisfactory resolution to the problem of censorship in forensic interpretation events requires that one suggest that forensics will reap significant rewards from more tolerant attitudes regarding literary choice. Just as high-quality debate critics should be attuned to the depth of issues confronting their event, interpretation critics must strive to develop an equally complete and sophisticated understanding of the literary forum. Only after the attainment of this important standard of criticism will the event truly succeed in its mission of literary appreciation and understanding. (HTH)

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IN DEFENSE OF DIRTY WORDS: THE CASE AGAINST JUDICIAL CENSORSHIP IN ORAL INTERPRETATION EVENTS

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The morality of public discourse has long been a major issue among communication scholars, extending to a number of areas, including the relationship between the freedom of speech and profane language. Haiman cogently capsulated the situation: "Perhaps no free speech controversies in the United States stimulate the flow of as much public adrenalin as those surrounding the communication of allegedly immoral words and scenes."[1] Unfortunately, within the realm of forensic oral interpretation, the concern of the use of profanity in presentations has manifested repressing criticism on behalf of some judges. Competitors are confronted by judges, who when observing the use of profane language, express their offense by ranking the performances negatively. This paper argues that this judicial opposition is deleterious not only to the precepts of oral interpretation, but in a larger sense, the pursuit of intellectual freedom.

Ignored in forensic scholarship, profanity has been discussed by other communication researchers. Rothwell provided definitional background:

> Such indecent terms fall into essentially four categories: 1) copulative terms such as "fuck," 2) excretory

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terms such as "shit" and "piss," 3) terms related to human genitals such as "cunt" and "cock," and 4) terms related to sexual irregularities such as "bastard" and "bitch."[2]

This paper intends to address the problem of, in effect, censorship imposed by certain forensic critics. When confronted by certain passages of literature that contain profane words, the criticism noted on ballots appears to be predominantly directed toward the supposed offensive nature of the language. Representative of such works is Michael Cristofer's The Shadow Box:

> Beverly: You know, you don't look like a faggot.
>
> Mark: Oh, for Christ's sake!
>
> Beverly: No I mean it . . . I didn't expect . . .
>
> Mark: Well, you'll get used to it. You just have to think of me as your average cocksucker. All right?[3]

David Mamet employed similar words in Glengarry Glen Ross:

> Roma: You ever take a dump that made you feel you'd just slept twelve hours?
>
> Lingk: Did I . . . ?
>
> Roma: Yes
>
> Lingk: I don't know
>
> Roma: Or a piss . . .? A great meal fades in reflection. Everything else gains. You know why? Cause it's only food. This shit we eat, it keeps us going. But it's only food. The great

fucks that you may of had. What do you remember about them?[4]

Adverse reaction toward profane literature is not limited soley to the forensic arena of performance. Shirley noted that numerous Shakesperean works were scrutinized and censored before they reached actual public performance in the 1500's.[5] More contemporary examples include the editing of Albee's Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf? by a Boston city censor requesting that that the Woolf road company eliminate "irreverent refeerences to the Diety and to reduce profanity in future performances."[6] To the credit of the theatre, though, the winds of censorship have abated, thus allowing the works of Cristofer, Mamet, Albee, and others to be performed in a unbridled atmosphere. Unfortunately, such advances are markedly absent among certain critics in forensics. As Charlotte Lee argued, some judges are "basically fuddy duddies who believe that young people shouldn't use that language."[7] However, the "fuddy duddy" attitude apears to be age boundless, and , as most coaches nad competitors readily acknowledge, it pervades a suprisingly larrge nnumber of critics.

The intolerance of profane language in interpretation competition inflicts significant damage on both the artistic endeavor of the event and upon the entire collegiate learning experience. Initially, the harm done to the event is suggested by Lee and Gura's definitional statement from Oral Interpretation: "Interpretation is the art of communicating to an audience a work of literary art in in intellectual, emotional,

and aesthetic entirety [my emphasis]."[8] The censorship of profane language is in blatant violation of the Lee and Gura axiom. It is not possible for the interpreter to convey the literature in its entirety when he/she is confronted with having to avoid the wrath of the offended judge and the attendant low rank in the round. Attempts to avoid the wrath (discussed in detail below) inherently violate the "entirety" concern expressed by Lee and Gura by perverting the author's intent. As Lee suggested, when one changes the authors's words, the author's entire concept is being changed; the total intent, Lee maintained, must be presented.[9]

Contemporary literature abounds with profanity. However, this usage reflects an accurate depicition of realistic language. Cameron found that, in a large sample of everyday speech, every fourtheenth word contained some sort of profanity.[10] Within the dramatic context, a critic from the Los Angeles Times argued that " . . . characters in movies, God help us, speak just as many of us do in real life. The profanity in "Beverly Hills Cop" [for example] simply reflects the speech patterns of countless Americans. . . . "[11] Perhaps if the idea of drama simply imitating life was utilized as an evaluative criterion in interpretation competition (rather than concern over use of "dirty words") the event would flourish from improved examples of criticism.

The censorship of interpretaion performances not only affects the event, but derogates the entire collegiate learning experience. One of the hallmarks of the University experience

is the freedom to explore and express various points of view, regardless of some sense of social unacceptability. With the road of understanding through performance blocked by judicial censorship, the competing interpreter is denied the inherent benefits of experiencing works by Mamets, Cristofers, and other outstanding works of drama, prose, and poetry that don't fit into the narrow focus of certain critics. Most ironically, the same works objected to by forensic critics are heralded by theatre critics. For example, both The Shadow Box and Glengarry Glen Ross have been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Outstanding Drama. Mamet has also received the prestigious "Obie" three times, all for equally profane works of Sexual Perversity in Chicago, American Buffalo, and Edmond.[12] To relegate these works to the position of "bad literature", therefore discouraging student exploration of the work, is in repugnant contridiction to the fundamentals of higher education. Kerr oulined the dangers inherent in such censorship:

> The essential fear that nags at the critical mind whenever its is confronted by censorship is the fear that good art will be lost. This is a valid, reasonable fear. The possibility is a real possibility. There is a further fear, and the further possibility, that in an atmosphere dominated by widespread, habitual, amateur censorship good art will never even be produced, let alone lost.[13]

Indeed, the foundation of society seems adversely affected by such censorship. Kerr maintained further:

> . . . the health of society, it must be remembered, does not come from negative, protective acts alone. Caution, in itself, does not guarantee a man safe and sound passage through a complex world. . . . Health is as much the result of positive, vigorously creative acts as it is of prudential acts.[14]

Admittedly, when advancing this argument beyond the confines of this paper, the author is confronted with accusations of "overstating the problem." After all, as some maintain, the small community of speech tournaments resides far from any location near the "real world." To honestly abide by such shortsighted and limited thinking decries any value attested to by forensic "educators."

Aside from avoiding the literature, a competing interpreter can employ another, albeit, counterproductive alternative. He/she can edit language thought to be offensive from the script. Confronted with the desire to compete succesfully, this is predictable treatment of literature. As one successful competitor related to the author when examining a profane selection, "I've got to cut it; I want to win." Such thinking, (at its best, simplistic) generates a twofold harm. Initially, omission and/or substitution again is in disregard of author's intent. There is little justification in empowering an interpreter to exercise such excessive "dramatic license" over the author's published work, simply to avoid suffering forensic defeat. Along this line, the substitution of profane words often renders the literature impotent in dramatic effect. As

Eldridge Cleaver cogently illustrated: "We could talk about 'you dirty mother intercourser.' We could say that. But it doesn't have the little pungent punch."[15]

Proposing a satisfactory resolution to the problem of censorship in forensic interpretation events is an imposing obstacle. Arguing that there is a need for increased toleration from judges is somewhat analogous to pleading in the 50's and 60's for toleration of racial integration. Employing debate terminology, a proponent of such change cannot provide solvency for the harms of censorship by merely concluding with a vacuous cry of "critics should be more lenient." The calls for racial integration fell on similar deaf ears. Progress was finally realized in civil rights due to the appreciation of the undeniable benefits resulting from integration. One can safely suggest that forensics will reap significant rewards resulting from more tolerant attitudes regarding literary choice . Brooks pointed to such advantages:

> An integral part of learning is evaluation and feedback. In the educational process we assume that evaluation is a rational act involving systematic analysis and judgement based on relevant criteria, and that the evaluation should be fed back to the learner so that appropriate understandings and behaviors are positively reinforced and erroneous understandings and behaviors are corrected.[16]

The process of judgement and evaluation must be premised on a fair and reasonable hearing by critics that is, at best, improb-

able when literary works are objected to merely on the basis of profanity.

It is not the position herein that toleration of profanity requires blind acceptance of any use of "dirty words." As a critic, one is too often innundated with profanity in a manner devoid of any thought or feeling. Certain competitors feel the need to vocally overemphazize expletives. They appear to find some enjoyment in trying to "shock" the critic with supposedly mature language. Critics should comment on these occurances exactly for what they are: bad interpretation. Kerr provided an interesting solution to this all-too-prevalent situation:

> . . . The truth of the matter is that none of us--not even the most passionate opponent of censorship--really cares what happens to bad art. If the work is aesthetically poor, we don't honestly care what anyone does with it. The world can wrap fish with it--as it most certainly will--and we're not going to mind.[17]

What is demanded is an increased appreciation of the world of literary study and performance, free from the confines of reactionary criticism toward profanity. Just as high-quality debate critics should be attuned to the depth of issues confronting their event, interpretation critics must strive to develop and equally complete and suffistocated understanding of the literary forum. Only after the attainment of this important standard of criticism will the event truly succeed in its mission of literary appreciation and understanding. Shirley provided and encouraging analogy form Shakespearean times:

> The shock value might not have been so great as for "Sblood" or "Zounds," but to an audience attuned to the subtleties of imagery, and as practiced in listening as many Jacobeans were, the seriousness of the phrases would soon be apparent. After all, it is not the oath by itself but swearing in context with the many other facets of the plays that creates the effectiveness.[18]

Similarly, contemporary literature is often enhanced by the presence of profanity, and excising the profanity from forensic interpretation demeans not only the event, but the process that the event is designed to benefit.

Notes

[1]Franklyn Haiman, Freedom of Speech: Issues and Cases (New York: Random House, 1966) 95.

[2]J.Don Rothwell, "Verbal Obscenity: Time for Second Thoughts," Western Speech 35 (1971): 232.

[3]Michael Cristofer, The Shadow Box (New York: Avon, 1977) 36-37.

[4]David Mamet, Glengarry Glen Ross (New York: Grove, 1983) 47-48.

[5]Frances Shirley, Swearing and Perjury in Shakespeare's Plays (London: George Allen & Unwin).

[6]New York Times, 3 Sept., 1963, rpt. in Haiman, 95.

[7]Charlotte Lee, Professor Emeritus, Northwestern University, telephone interview, 1 February 1985.

[8]Lee and Timothy Gura, Oral Interpretation, 6th edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982) 3.

[9]Lee interview.

[10]P. Cameron, "Frequency of Profanity Usage," Midwest Psychological Association Convention, Chicago, 1969. Quoted in Robert N. Bostrom, John R. Basehart, and Charles M. Rossiter, Jr>, "The Effects of Three Types of Profane Language in Persuasive Messages," Journal of Communication 23 (1973): 461.

[11]Leonard Feather, "The Blacks, Whites, and Grays of 'Cop'," Los Angeles Times, 20 January 1985: "Calendar" 17.

[12]"Winners of Pulitzer Prizes," New York Times, 1 April 1984: B5

[13]Walter Kerr, Criticism and Censorship (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1956), rpt. in Haiman, 141.

[14]Kerr.

[15]Eldridge Cleaver. Speech delivered at Sacramento State College, October 2, 1968. Quoted in Rothwell, 237.

[16]William D. Brooks, "Judging Bias in Intercollegiate Debate," Journal of the American Forensic Association 7 (1971): 197.

[17]Kerr.

[18]Shirley, 152.